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The Administration's Tragicomedy: Nicaragua

With the Reagan administration, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Despite the president's landslide victory, the "liberal" press is still lambasted for being too influential. Despite a crop of young people who yearn for nothing else than businesses and homes of their own, we are told that values will have to be taught in the schools. And despite a religious revival that the president himself has proclaimed, the administration says all is lost unless prayer is returned to the schools.

Some of this is funny, some of it is not. But where things get both tragic and funny is Nicaragua. Talking to a group of lawyers the other day, Secretary of State George Shultz finally said what heretofore had only been whispered: the United States might have to send troops to Nicaragua. This "agonizing choice," Shultz said, could result from the very failure of Con-

gress to aid the so-called contras—the CIA-created army which, in a feat of creative packaging, is called "freedom fighters."

It's not difficult to see what Shultz is telling Congress: Either supply the money for others to do the fighting or, someday, we might have to do the fighting ourselves. What he does not explain, though, is why anybody has to do the fighting. In other words, what is the threat that prompts a secretary of state even to suggest that Americans will once again have to kill and be killed in yet another foreign country?

Aside from brandishing words such as "communist," Shultz supplies no answers, and history instructs that we do not need to make war on a nation just because its stamps bear the picture of Karl Marx. But even aside from that, Shultz's remarks come at a peculiar time. After all, the adminis-

tration can claim that things are going its way in Central America. The clear and present danger allegedly posed by Nicaragua is a lot less clear and present than it might have been.

Take the situation in El Salvador. The foremost accusation against Nicaragua is that it is "exporting revolution" to its neighbor to the north—arms and supplies across the Gulf of Fonseca to the waiting Salvadoran guerrillas. But the Salvadoran guerrillas are reeling, falling back on desperate tactics, and both the government and its army are resurgent. As if that were not enough, we are also told that the Salvadoran right, often so ruthless, is also in a state of disarray. Moderation—wonderful moderation—is supposedly the idea whose time has come in El Salvador.

As for Nicaragua itself, it reels. Its economy is a shambles. Draft evaders take to the hills. It has to rely almost

entirely on Moscow for its economic sustenance, and it is surrounded by hostile neighbors with armies—and air forces—bigger than its own. It's hard to see that it represents a threat to anything other than the lingering belief that revolutions from the left are always wonderful ideas.

Nevertheless, Shultz raises the prospect of war. He does so not a week after the president of Honduras was assured that the United States stood ready to come to his aid should he get into a scrap with Nicaragua. This is yet another intimation of American involvement since it is the Hondurans who shelter the contras. Sooner or later any nation—Nicaragua included—would seek to destroy its enemies, no matter where they might be harbored.

For some time now, Shultz has been having an identity problem in which he sees himself as the secretary of de-

fense. His speeches—and not Caspar Weinberger's—are muggy with martial airs while it is Weinberger who warns that war is about killing and should be entered reluctantly. It is impossible to say who speaks for the president, but in this case it appears to be Shultz. When the president pounds his desk in an anti-Nicaragua fury, it is Shultz who responds with talk of troops.

As with so much else in this administration, results take a back seat to ideology. It hardly seems to matter that Nicaragua is less of a threat now than it was, say, two years ago. What really matters is that it exists—yet another Marxist state in the Western Hemisphere. It is certainly clear to Managua—and maybe even to the Contadora nations—that nothing but the eradication of the Sandinista regime will appease Reagan. Listen to Shultz. It's not Nicaragua he's warning, it's us.